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ABSTRACT

With the celebration of the United States bicentennial as impetus, university students and faculty attempted several approaches to the creation of a touring documentary production composed almost completely from primary sources. This paper describes the process involved in producing a traveling show which featured groups relatively excluded from historical study, such as common soldiers, loyalists, women, American Indians, and Blacks. Except for an opening song and a few transitional statements, the final script consisted entirely of dialogue and music drawn directly from documents of the revolutionary period between the years 1758 and 1784. The paper also discusses problems which arose and the educational benefits which resulted. (JM)

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Title: Creating Documentary Theatre as Educational Process

Abstract:

With the celebration of the bicentennial as impetus, university students and faculty attempted several approaches to ^{the} creation of a touring documentary production composed almost completely from primary sources. The paper describes the process, problems which arose, and cites educational benefits which resulted.

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DOCUMENTARY THEATRE AS EDUCATIONAL PROCESS

Adeline Hirschfeld-Medalia

The documentary production discussed in this article grew out of a chance conversation which occurred two years prior to 1976 with Charles Akers, an American historian at Oakland University. He suggested that we might combine the efforts of faculty and students from both history and communication arts in producing a show to commemorate the bicentennial. The idea seemed promising, so much so, in fact, that we decided to proceed with it despite our failure to secure outside funding for the project.

OUR OBJECTIVES

We agreed that we would put our primary emphasis on the process involved, making certain that the students would be actively participating in every phase of the preparation. Through all this we felt they would be learning American history, as well as experiencing the full range of documentary theatre production, from script to performance. In addition, we would be marking in a significant way the occasion of our country's bicentennial year. We managed finally to achieve most of these goals, while producing a traveling show which played in schools, shopping centers, and on one occasion in even an ice arena!

Professor Akers suggested that we try to feature groups which have been relatively excluded from historical study, such as common soldiers, loyalists, women, Indians and Blacks. We wanted a script

based, if possible, only on primary source materials--diaries, newspapers, stories, cartoons, speeches, songs, letters, etc. Since we intended to tour, we were constrained in our technical supports to the limits imposed by mobile theatre: sparse settings, simple props, costumes and music.

DOCUMENTARY THEATRE DEFINED

Our intended documentary theatre fit the format discussed by Phillis Reinstra in her 1972 article in which she traced the history of the form from Piscator through Brecht and beyond. Documentary theatre as she defines it is "politically and/or historically oriented," creating a dramatic literature by "structuring or formalizing raw human drama as it appears in recorded hearings, trials, debates, speeches and interviews."¹ Documentary theatre has been used by some writers primarily as a means for expressing strong positions of advocacy. Peter Weiss, for example, author of the Piscator-directed play, The Investigation, maintains that "The documentary theatre takes sides. The only possible epilogue of many of its themes is a condemnation. For a theatre of this type objectivity--from a certain angle--seems a concept of which those in power make use in order to excuse their acts."² Documentary drama produced in the sixties and early seventies, such as Martin Duberman's In White America³ and Paul Foster's Tom Paine,⁴ followed this pattern. In many other documentary plays, however, the primary aim has been to give past history an immediacy and significance for modern audiences.⁵ A spokesman for this second purpose is Peter Cheeseman, director at

the Victorian Theatre in Stoke-on-Trent, a professional permanent theatre which has spawned some successful West End plays such as those of Alan Ayckbourn. Each year since 1964, Cheeseman has produced a musical documentary show based on the past history of the local community. He cites two purposes: first, to "destroy the barriers which so often grow up between the creative artist and the most ordinary people";⁶ and second, to "show people the past of their community in a way which will give them a sense of their past . . . that they . . . are part of a historical perspective."⁷ Cheeseman makes no exalted claims for his shows. "They're not meant to be great art at all. They are in fact occasional and circumstantial shows made for our home theatre each year and have only accidental meaning and purpose outside the situation."⁸ Here we have a context-bound theatre, functioning for particular audiences, times, and places, similar in its intended focus to our own bicentennial production.

The greatest challenge in this form of theatre involves finding means for lending dramatic punch to intrinsically non-theatrical material. Peter Weiss in his article, "Fourteen Propositions with Respect to the Documentary Theatre," suggests some possibilities: "Reports or fragments of reports can be inserted at intervals of precisely limited duration so as to create a rhythm. . . . By means of a sudden break, a situation is transformed into its contrary. An isolated protagonist faces a host of narrators. . . . Personalities are caricatured, the situations drastically simplified in order to make them more striking. Songs are used for the purpose of presenting

reports, commentaries, summaries. Introduction of chorus and pantomime . . . masks and decorative accessories. Musical accompaniment. Sound effects."⁹

In adapting literature to documentary theatre, the compiler may have to take considerable liberties with the materials. As Richard Haas correctly notes, "The tone of a poem might be altered, interrupted, or abbreviated in a way that would horrify anyone in a class studying the interpretation of poetry, . . . in the collectors odeion [Haas's term for documentary theatre] any piece of literature serves a role subservient to the production's purpose."¹⁰

THE STEPS INVOLVED

As indicated earlier, we wanted student involvement throughout, requiring, of course, preparatory work in both history and theatre. Three separate university courses were set up. First, Professor Akers offered a history course in Colonial and Revolutionary America designed especially for individuals responsible for observances of the bicentennial. Not unexpectedly, almost all the students were teachers. Unfortunately, only one of our theatre students enrolled in the course, but we gained from it, nevertheless, a route to the primary materials we needed. The theatre component was covered in a second course in which I presented the students with an introduction to documentary theatre. The course ended with student productions of bicentennial sketches.¹¹ From audiences as well as our own reactions to these we learned a great deal. Along with our failings, many positive things were demonstrated in these initial productions, ideas

subsequently incorporated into our final touring script, such as means for integrating slides, sound effects, choral speaking, music, slow motion movement and dance.

At last, in a third university course we produced the touring show. Recognizing finally that to compile a unified script is ultimately a one-person job, I myself created the final script for touring. Besides the aforementioned criteria imposed by the audiences we expected, we now had a growing awareness of the general apathy and even hostility which existed toward the bicentennial. Therefore we wanted a fresh perspective on the period, an avoidance of patriotic clichés. In addition, we needed a script that could be enormously flexible, easily adaptable in length from an hour to ten- or twenty-minute segments, while still maintaining some standards of sense of movement, rhythm, pace, etc. I counted heavily on feedback from the students. If they judged items uninteresting or too difficult to understand, I discarded them. Meanwhile, we continued our search for visual materials, cartoons, portraits, etc. A vacation trip took me to Old Sturbridge village in Massachusetts, where I photographed slides of authentic period interior and exterior scenes.

With the exception of an opening song and a few transition statements, the final script consisted entirely of dialogue and music drawn directly from documents of the Revolutionary period between the years 1758 and 1784. The two major sources were Joseph Plumb Martin's A Narrative of Some of the Adventures, Dangers and Sufferings of a Revolutionary Soldier, Interspersed with Anecdotes of Incidents

that Occurred Within His Own Observation,¹² and Herbert T. Wade's and Robert A. Lively's This Glorious Cause: The Adventures of Two Company Officers in Washington's Army.¹³ In the first book we found several delightful narrative incidents which adapted easily into story or chamber theatre style. From the second book we excerpted letters between a Lieutenant Hodgkins and his wife Sarah. Interspersed throughout the show, they gave the script a touch of chronology, transitions, and a degree of unity. Portions of the script followed soldiers of the army from enlistment to discharge. However, we avoided the better-known events, the important battles, etc., and emphasized the often amusing interactions between the populace and the soldiers as the latter went about procuring food, lodging, and female companionship. Without ignoring the familiar themes of death, sickness and starvation, we concentrated, especially in the versions played in shopping centers and schools, on comic aspects.

We were surprised and delighted to find much evidence of the militancy of women. We included four amusing skits of warlike and even lawless behavior of women, bracketing this series with an exaggeratedly simpering minuet danced to a reading of Benjamin Franklin's flowery poem, which begins: "Woman! Ye Gods! What Cannot Woman do? She can the drooping Intellect renew; the Vitals cheer and strengthen ev'ry part."¹⁴

In rehearsals we continued the general goal of student involvement. We improvised, revised, extensively cut, even reassigned roles. I credit the group process of blocking with the remarkable flexibility

the actors displayed during the tour as they faced an amazing assortment of acting spaces and audiences.

SOME PROBLEMS IN THE DOCUMENTARY FORM

Of the difficulties we encountered, I would like to mention a few major ones:

1. The complications arising out of experimentation on untried materials, and the complexities of incorporating media and sound effects make rehearsal time demands much heavier than one is likely to anticipate.
2. The language of historical material poses very real problems. What seems charmingly archaic to the silent reader may be incomprehensible to the listener. Adaptation for staging requires cutting and more cutting, rearrangement and heavy visual reinforcement, as well as orientation of the audience on time, place, identity and relationship of characters.
3. One dares not assume that an audience knows its history; for example, the distinction between "Tory" and "patriot." Two contrasting reports of a single incident, an attack on a group of Tories, gave us an opportunity to demonstrate graphically the biased journalism of the time. The innocent victims in the Tory account were, of course, the archvillains in the patriot version. However, even with "Tory" and "patriot" name bands and the exchanging of "villain" and "victim" masks between the two enactments, I'm not sure all the audience got the point. They did, however, respond

positively to the fight played in choreographed slow-motion mime.

4. Long passages must be broken up or drastically cut. In one of our student-directed productions, a Black woman attempted a laudable concept, a script focusing on the contributions of Black women throughout American history. Seeing modern counterparts to three strong Black women from history, she paired Sojourner Truth with Shirley Chisholm, Harriet Tubman with Angela Davis, and Phillis Wheatley with Nikki Giovanni. We soon realized that monologues of factual material and even items of poetry failed as theatre. Further development of the material was required, such as a contrapuntal rhythm of the comparative elements; for example, the dramatic juxtaposition of portions of Phillis Wheatley's sweet flowery poetry with the wildly contrasting "Nigger, can you kill!" of Nikki Giovanni.¹⁵

CONCLUSION

Was the project successful as educational process? I believe it was. There is no question that the students who lived through all phases from research to performances would be able and probably willing to take on the task of creating documentary theatre of this commemorative type. In addition to the documentary theatre form, they gained firsthand experience with a variety of "mini-theatre" approaches, all of which were incorporated in the final production--chamber or story theatre, media theatre, readers theatre, mime, and even something akin to guerrilla theatre.

In addition, both the students and I learned the power of an inductive approach to history. We all started out relatively ignorant of the historical facts of the Revolutionary period. We began by reading about individuals who captured our hearts and our interest. Faced with the necessity of placing these characters in their historical context, we ultimately became acquainted with many of the major figures and events of the period. No history book, however, could ever give us the intimate, empathic involvement with these so-called "Common Folk--Uncommon People"¹⁶ that this documentary theatre experience afforded us.

Footnotes

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¹Phillis Reinstra, "Resurrecting the Past: Historical Documents as Materials for Readers Theatre," ST, 21, No. 4 (1972), 310.

²Peter Weiss, "Fourteen Propositions with Respect to the Documentary Theatre," World Theatre, 17, Nos. 5-6 (1968), 387.

³Martin Duberman, In White America: A Documentary Play (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1964).

⁴Paul Foster, Tom Paine (New York: Grove Press, 1968).

⁵E.g., P. J. Barry, Heritage: An American Folk Tale about the Lincoln Women in Two Parts (Boston: Walter H. Baker Co., 1967); Paul Shyre and John Dos Passos, USA: A Dramatic Revue (New York: Samuel French, 1960); A. E. Hotchner, The White House: A Presidential Entertainment in Two Acts (New York: Samuel French, 1963); John Ahart, "Heads of State" (unpublished); Winthrop Palmer, Mauria Edwards, and Jean Reaney, American Kaleidoscope (Chicago: Dramatic Publishing Co., 1973).

⁶Gillette A. Elvgren, Jr., "Documentary Theatre at Stoke-on-Trent," Educational Theatre Journal, 26, No. 1 (1974), 88.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 92.

⁹Weiss, "Fourteen Propositions," pp. 387 and 389.

¹⁰Richard Haas, Theatres of Interpretation (Ann Arbor: Roberts-Burton Publication, 1976), p. 84.

¹¹"The Two Hundred Year Itch," including Stephen Thomas, "Slices of Life," Cecilia Land, "Black Women Now and Then," Johanna Lubkowski and Emily Schreiber, "Love Is a Rash," and Mick Fair, "Spirits from '76" (unpublished, 1976).

¹²George E. Scheed, ed. (1962; rpt. New York: New York Times & Arno Press, n.d.).

¹³(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958).

¹⁴Benjamin Franklin, The Complete Poor Richard Almanacks (Barre, Mass.: Imprint Society, 1970), II, 415.

¹⁵Nikki Giovanni, "The True Import of Present Dialogue: Black vs. Negro," Black Feeling Black Talk (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1970), pp. 11-12.

¹⁶The title of our show.